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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "MELON FACTS." Information from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture.

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The melon family is up for discussion today. Among the most popular members of the family are those that have their fling in midsummer -- those old favorites, watermelon and muskmelon -- call it cantaloupe if you prefer -- and the newer honey ball and honeydew melon.

Picking a melon is about as much of a gamble as picking a husband. You may get a good one without half trying. And then again, all signs and prophesies may fail. Even an experienced melon-picker gets fooled now and then and chooses one that is unripe or too ripe.

No matter what variety of melon you are choosing, you can be sure of one thing -- it has to reach its full-ripe stage of maturity before it has the best flavor and the most sweetness. On the other hand, of course, no melon is good when it's overripe. The delicious melon, then, is fully ripe but never past that point.

You've probably heard of the various common tests for a good melon. As the old Arkansas farmer put it: "Ah pick muh melons by muh fo' senses -- a-lookin' an' a-sniffin' an' a-thumpin' an' a-pressin'." In other words, by sight, smell, sound, and touch.

Let's consider these tests, one by one, and see just how useful they are to the family melon-picker, whether she does her picking at the market or down in the melon patch.

First, how about picking your melon by its looks? Well, you can often get a pretty good idea of how ripe a melon is just that way. In general, as a melon ripens, it takes on a lighter or more yellowish color. For example, a ripe watermelon, though dark on top and sides, is yellowish on its underside -- the part that rests on the ground. When a watermelon is unripe, this underpart is usually a white or pale green. Now, when you're choosing a cantaloupe, look for one with coarse netting that stands out boldly over a rather light-colored rind. A very dark-green rind and a smoother surface show that the cantaloupe is still green. As for the honeydew melon, it is a creamy yellow when it's ripe. Honey balls may be a light yellow but may also be a whitish-green or grey at the just-right stage, all depending on the variety. You see, color counts in judging any melon. And with watermelons, size and weight count, too. The biggest and heaviest melon in sight is usually the best buy. So give melons a careful look-over before you take your pick.

What about choosing by the "sniffing" method? Well, here's another way of judging ripeness that works for all melons but watermelons. As most melons ripen, they become more fragrant. (The muskmelon got its name from its fragrance.) A green cantaloupe won't have any noticeable smell, but just sniff one that has ripened on the vine. One sniff of a just-right melon can wake almost any appetite. Ripe honey balls have a decided fragrance, but a ripe honeydew melon gives off only a faint aroma. If you have a sharp nose, you can also detect an overripe or starting-to-spoil odor in a melon, too. The sniffing test, then, is a good one for all melons but watermelons.

Speaking of watermelons, brings up the old-fashioned thumping test. Many a man never buys a watermelon without rapping it with his knuckles and listening to the kind of sound it makes. The theory is that a dull, hollow sound means a ripe melon, and a ringing sound shows that the melon is green. The catch about this test is that the dead-ripe or stale melon also gives forth that dull, hollow "clunk." The thumping test is only for watermelons -- and it's a not very accurate test even for them.

The fourth test is the pressing test. And here again, it goes for all but the watermelon. You see, as a melon ripens, its blossom-end softens. So, if you press your finger gently on the part of the fruit near the "eye" or "button," it will yield slightly if it's ripe. And it will feel too soft, if the melon is too ripe or bruised. But pressing a watermelon will tell you nothing, whether you press gently or hard. Severe pressing may damage the fruit and ruin its sale.

Well, any one of these tests may give you a general idea about a melon, but none of them are infallible. As the old man said, better pick your melon with all four senses. And even then, the only way to be dead-sure you have a good melon is to cut into it and try its juicy flesh yourself.

Now, just one or two other melon facts to help you make your selection. More good sweet cantaloupes are on the market nowadays than formerly, thanks to better methods of handling and shipping and also to Government standards of grading. The growers have found that they don't have to ship cantaloupes green, as they used to. They find that they can allow them to ripen on the vine and still ship them long distances, if they pre-cool and handle them properly. Of course, a vine-ripened melon is much sweeter than one picked green. But even with modern methods, cantaloupes are harder to ship than most other melons. And you can't keep them long at home either. Honey balls and honeydew melons, on the other hand, are good keepers. You can buy them before they are fully ripe and hold them until they are just right to eat.

A good many new melons have been appearing on the market in recent years. Years ago we imported the honeydew melon from Mediterranean countries and then crossed it with the cantaloupe to make the honey ball. Since then plant industry men and growers have been hard at work developing still newer varieties. Just now, they're working on a melon that will resist the wilt-disease which damages so many melon crops. And they're also trying to find strains of melon with more flavor and more sugar-content.

That's all about melons today. One of these days soon we'll talk about new ways to use melons. I'll be with you again tomorrow to answer questions.

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